

RAJASTHANI FOLK TALES



Reading to Learn

RAJASTHANI FOLK TALES

BY

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FOREWORD

The Reading to Learn Project, launched by the National Council of Educational Research and Training, aims at grooming the student to become adept at reading, to make him/her love books and to make him/her aware of the world of wonder and beauty around and within him/her. This project is primarily designed to rejuvenate the learner, to whet his/her curiosity and to develop in him/her an enquiring mind.

Under this project a series of books in English and Hindi for different school stages have been prepared. The thematic content of these books ranges from stories/folk tales, poems and novelettes to popular science, games and sports.

The NCERT is grateful to the eminent authors who have spared their valuable time to prepare delightful books for children. I also thank Prof. (Km.) S.K. Ram for piloting the project in English and for preparing some of the books.

The NCERT sincerely hopes that these books would enthuse and inspire the youth of India to participate in a glorious odyssey into the realm of books. This odyssey into books will yield aesthetic, emotional and intellectual pleasure. It will also contribute materially towards improving the quality of life of the youth and prepare them for life-long education.

P.L. MALHOTRA

Director

National Council of Educational
Research and Training

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A Bout of Wrestling

Wrestling has ever been a popular sport in Rajasthan. The sport's divine patron is the well-loved god, Hanuman. Massive *pahlwans* with oil-massaged bodies, fed on a diet of highly nourishing food, pure *ghee* and gallons of milk, fight in arenas where the ground is covered with sand. Wrestling is both a sport and an entertainment. During festivals and fairs, the village folk gather to watch tournaments held between rival *pahlwans*. From ancient times wrestling has been learnt through the guru-shishya tradition, but the disciples of the same guru never fight each other.

This is the story of a *pahlwan*—a wrestler, who faced a unique challenge.

His name was Vijay Singh. He towered above others, with massive shoulders and brawny arms. His muscular appearance was enhanced by a head shaved clean, and a fearsome moustache which curved like

the horns of a water buffalo. Clothes seemed incongruous and stripped to the waist, he could pit his extraordinary strength against a worthy rival. And, indeed, Vijay Singh was a born wrestler.

The people of his village loved him, looked up to him for protection, but entertained a healthy respect for his strength. Though slow to anger and gentle with children, Vijay Singh could wreak havoc if provoked.

The *pahlwan* had one shortcoming. A shortcoming which, more often than not, landed him in awkward situations. He was given to boasting.

Very gregarious by nature, he enjoyed his popularity. One day, he was sitting in the marketplace. As usual, several young men surrounded him, watching admiringly as their hero drank glass after glass of rich, creamy milk.

Satisfied with his morning's quota of milk, Vijay Singh belched long and appreciatively. Then, rather drunk with his social success, he proceeded to proclaim, "I'm not a bit afraid of demons and ghosts. I wish I could meet one of them. I'd sure teach him a lesson!"

There were murmurs of apprehension among the young men.

"Will you be able to walk alone at night through the Haunted Desert? People say that ghosts roam there freely. Men are swallowed into holes which open up without warning, and queer shrieks and moans echo all around. Any traveller caught unawares in the Haunted Desert perishes there never to return! Why, whole caravans of camels and people have vanished!"

There was a strange sinking feeling in the region of Vijay Singh's strong heart. He had done it again! This was a challenge he could not refuse. His entire reputation rested on making good his crazy claim that he would have it out with a ghost and emerge the victor.

With the worshipping eyes of the young men upon him, Vijay Singh attempted to stall. "I have heard

of the Haunted Desert," he said in a considering voice, "but where on earth is it? I've always thought it a fairy tale! Stories made up by travellers to pass a boring evening."

"Oh no," said one young man, "it's true. Just yesterday I met a weary traveller at the *sarai*. He said that his travelling companions were assaulted by the ghosts of the Haunted Desert. He raced his camel hell for leather and managed to escape because of the confusion! He wasn't very coherent because he was so frightened!"

"The Haunted Desert," explained another young man, "is ten miles to the west on the road to Jaisalmer. As you walk towards the west the vegetation becomes thinner and thinner, till there's only an occasional thorny bush. The landmark is an ugly, black rock that looks like the head of a camel. It rears out of the desert and beyond are only rolling sands and wilderness."

So it happened that, in the evening, the whole village turned out to bid farewell to Vijay Singh, the wrestler. The elders muttered dire warnings, while the young men were full of delicious anticipation.

Twirling his moustache, displaying a false bravado, Vijay Singh turned to walk west. Just then an old woman hobbled forward to thrust a small packet into his pocket. And Vijay Singh walked into the fiery red sunset of the desert.

As he walked, the night deepened. Fortunately the moon was bright and the stars shone clearly in the Rajasthan sky. Still a few miles short of his goal, he remembered the old woman's packet. He took it out of his pocket, and opened it. All it contained was a lump of salt and an egg!

Vijay Singh smiled to himself. The old woman was known for her eccentricities. She gathered mysterious herbs and things on her forays into the desert. She also talked to her goats and sheep as if they were human !

"But I should have thanked her. After all she is the grandmother of the prettiest girl in the village. Oh well, it doesn't matter. I can now make out that sinister looking rock."

In an upsurge of real confidence, similar to what he felt once he was in the arena, Vijay Singh determined that he would not give up without a

struggle worthy of his reputation as the strongest man in the three neighbouring villages. Expanding his chest, with a final twirl to his moustache, all senses alert, Vijay Singh strode into the Haunted Desert.

A voice came quavering over the desert wastes, calling his name. "Vijay Singh, Vijay Singh, mighty wrestler! Strongest man in three villages! You are going the wrong way; you will get lost in the desert! Come this way! I am your friend, Natwar."

At once Vijay Singh realised that this was not his friend, Natwar, but a ghost of the Haunted Desert. Employing a cunning strategy, he called back. "Where are you, my dear Natwar. It's so dark, that I cannot see. Come near me and show me the way!" Like all good wrestlers, Vijay Singh wanted to size up his enemy. After all, a wrestler must know who he is fighting.

Soon the ghost materialised at his side, disguised as Natwar.

"Aha!" said Vijay Singh as he peered at his face. "So here you are. One thing is certain, you are not Natwar. You are just a plain lying ghost. Anyway, you're the creature I was longing to meet. Now I

don't have to walk all night. You must know why I wanted to meet you...."

"But I don't," interrupted the ghost. He wasn't used to being treated so shabbily. People started back in horror when they met him. He had actually seen their hair standing on end. And so often persons had lost their voices in the pleasure of their acquaintance with him! But here was this unfeeling man declaring that he wanted to meet him! It didn't make sense.

"Really, I don't know why you have been longing to meet me," the ghost repeated.

"That proves," said Vijay Singh in a bored voice, "that you are a pretty stupid ghost. The least a ghoul can do is to read a man's thoughts. However, even a stupid and worthless ghost is better than no ghost. As for me," continued Vijay Singh, slapping his thighs, "as for me, I am a champion wrestler. I have been known to fight three wrestlers single-handed. At a pinch, I can even lift a full-grown camel. But to tell you the truth, I'm pretty tired of wrestling with men. I want to fight a supernatural being. So now you know why I wanted to meet you."

The ghost was speechless. One had to admit that

the man had gall, but he talked too much. Marshalling his wits, the ghost made an attempt to look Vijay Singh scornfully in the eye. He said, "Quite frankly, you don't appear all that strong to me."

"Appearances are deceptive," Vijay Singh recalled his guru's words. "Take your case, for instance. You appear to be Natwar, though actually you are a rascal of a ghost. If you doubt my strength, let me give you a demonstration that will convince you."

So saying, he stooped and picked up a piece of rock from the sand. This he offered to the ghost.

"Take this rock and feel it. It appears to be dead and dry. But I tell you that it is filled with fluid. Try and squeeze it hard and see for yourself if I am wrong."

While the ghost tried unsuccessfully to squeeze the rock with one hand, then with both, Vijay Singh stealthily took out the egg from his pocket.

Looking pityingly at the efforts of the ghost, he took the rock from him. He placed it between both hands and squeezed. At once the yellow yolk oozed from around his fingers, and the crackling of the broken egg shell created the illusion of the stone being crushed.

The ghost was so astonished that he did not notice when Vijay Singh bent to clean his hands with sand and disposed of the tell-tale egg shell. Vijay Singh then picked up another piece of rock.

Without a word the ghoul took it, felt it, and peered at it while Vijay Singh watched. Once again he conveyed his hand to his pocket to take out the lump of salt.

"This is only a stone," protested the ghost. "And anyway it is too dark to see."

"Never heard of a ghost who can't see in the dark!" remarked Vijay Singh. "That stone which you hold in your hand, contains salt. Crumble it and see."

Again the ghost tried to crush the stone, then mutely held it out to Vijay Singh. The ghost had now begun to doubt his ghostly powers.

"I can see that you're not going to be a worthy opponent. What's the use of wrestling with a weakling whom I can floor in a minute?"

So saying, he casually crumbled the lump of salt, and let the stone drop in the darkness. He held out his hand and commanded the ghost to taste the powdered stone.

Mesmerised with the *pahlwan's* extraordinary strength, the ghost did as he was told. Alarm shot through him. This man could easily vanquish him in a wrestling bout in the dark. But perhaps, he could be lured into his home, and tricked. Cunning might prevail where physical strength had failed.

Assuming an ingratiating manner, the ghost said, "Friend Vijay Singh, it is an honour to meet a man like you! I admit to being defeated. But where will you go tonight? Rest in my house, You can leave tomorrow."

Now thoroughly in his element, Vijay Singh replied, "I am loth to refuse your hospitality, and we may as well resume our journey in the morning. For you will go with me as my prisoner. I must display the trophy of my victory to my people!"

The ghost bowed in agreement, but silently vowed to destroy Vijay Singh in the night. He led him to the ugly rock which reared its camel-head out of the desert.

Through a secret opening, they entered the vast cave-like chambers hewn out of the rock. Flickering butter lamps lighted their way. The plundered loot

from lost caravans lay around them. Chests overflowed with jewels, silken coverlets adorned carved diwans, rich tapestries hung down the walls, and exquisitely woven carpets hid the rough floors. Vijay Singh was astounded.

The ghost fed him dry fruits such as traders carried from Afghanistan to Hindustan. And later the ghoul assigned him a luxurious diwan to sleep on, complete with pillows and bolsters.

But Vijay Singh lay awake the whole night, listening to the snores of the ghost. He was certain that the ghost was not to be trusted. In the middle of the night, Vijay Singh slipped off his bed. He placed a bolster in the centre of the diwan, throwing over it a coverlet to make it look exactly like a sleeping man. Having done this he crouched watchfully in a dark corner.

Sure enough, just before break of dawn, at a time when men sleep the soundest, the ghost approached the bed armed with a stout club. He brought the club down with a mighty thud on what he thought was Vijay Singh's hapless head. Not hearing even a groan, he smiled, pleased that he had killed his man.

However, just to make doubly sure, he struck the sleeping bolster six more time. Then satisfied with his work, he returned to his couch, and covering his head, settled down to sleep again.

Meanwhile, Vijay Singh crept silently back into bed. After a pause, he groaned in disgust, threw back his coverlet, and sat up.

Disturbed by the noise, the ghost peeped from under his bed clothes, to see the strong man stretching his arms above his head and yawning. For a moment the ghost turned rigid with shock.

"Friend ghoul, there are insects in your cave," said Vijay Singh in a complaining voice. "Here I was, enjoying the sweetest sleep I've had in years, and there comes this insect to trouble me." Then musingly, "Strange, I distinctly counted seven flappings of its wings. Of course, it has not bitten me, I don't feel itchy. But it's most annoying."

The ghost panicked. Those seven blows would have reduced any other man to pulp.

"There is no safety near a formidable wrestler like this," he thought and fled from the cave.

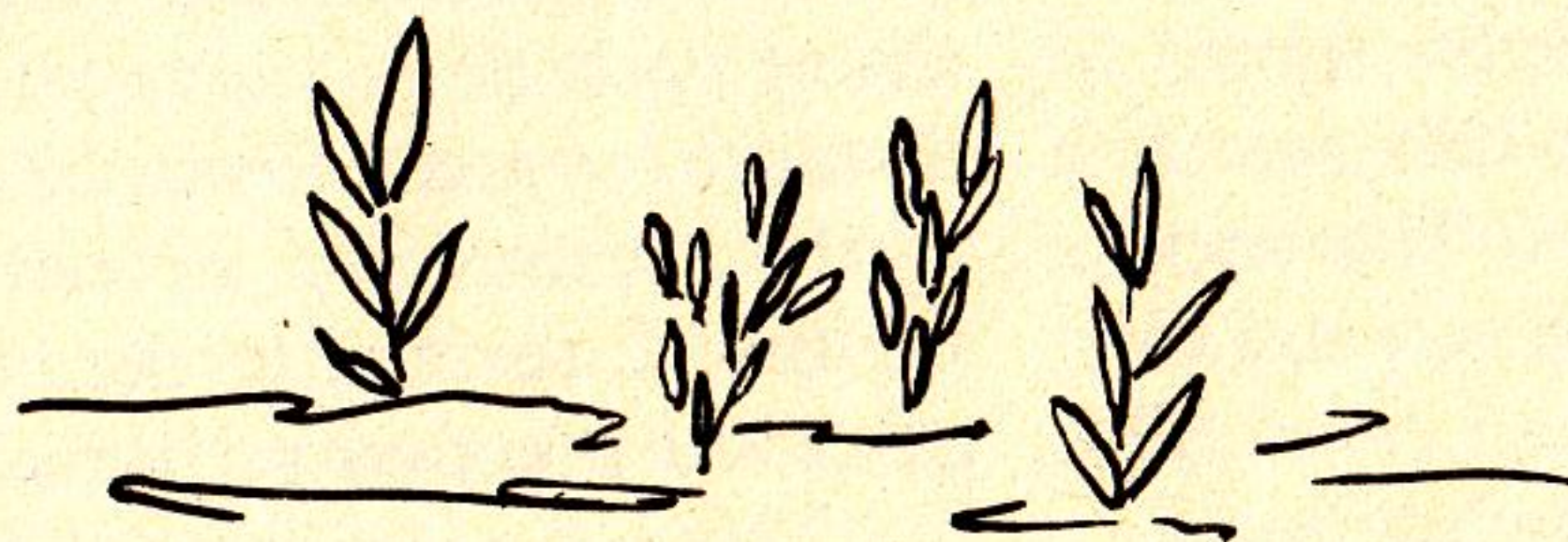
It took several camels from his village to remove

the property Vijay Singh had acquired. He returned much of the property to the rightful caravan owners. However, some of the property was left unclaimed, enough to make the wrestler a wealthy man.

He went especially to the bent old woman, thanked

her for her invaluable gifts, and asked for her granddaughter's hand in marriage.

Thenceforth, Vijay Singh was more careful about boasting. It is said that no traveller was ever troubled again in the Haunted Desert.



The Fakir Who Was Different

People who are strangers to Rajasthan tend to imagine it as only a desert, with sparse vegetation and rolling sand dunes, but this is not true. The desert, though vast, is only a part of Rajasthan. Anyone who has travelled from Delhi to Jaipur, or from Ajmer to Udaipur and on to Mount Abu, will see hills, scorched in summer, and green after the rains. The ancient Aravallis roll through Rajasthan on their way to Delhi, and leave in their wake rocky cliffs and caves. This is the story of a fakir who lived in such a cave.

Once, long ago, a wandering fakir got lost for sometime in a thick jungle. By chance he found his way to the kingdom of Raigarh. With great relief he gazed upon the strong walls of the fort which crowned a hill, and at the carved gables that towered over the battlement.

He stood at the edge of the forest from which he

had emerged, and climbing up a hillock surveyed the town below. Dusty streets ran between houses and the market-place. Women in colourful clothes, their faces thickly veiled, men and playful children bustled about with dogs, cows and camel-carts. In the far distance lay green fields, heavy with harvest, watered by the stream which snaked silver around the base of the hill. It seemed to the fakir that there was an air of casual prosperity about the town.

"This is the place to stay," thought the weary fakir, "I am tired of my own company. No one will recognise me here as I am far from home."

This mendicant was different from any fakir or sadhu who had ever come to Raigarh. He was not clad in a *dhoti*, nor did he carry a begging bowl. Neither were coarse locks of hair wound untidily round his head.

True, his once white clothes were soiled with his passage through the jungle, but he was exceptionally handsome with a powerful build. His long hair fell to his broad shoulders, and his silky, black beard was well combed and gleaming. And a curved shape under his garments could be distinctly identified as a dagger.

If it were not for his holy appearance, the fakir might well have been a warlike Rajput. As, indeed, he was. He was the younger son of a king. Insanely jealous of his brother, who would ascend the throne, he once attempted to murder him. Fortunately, the treacherous arrow missed its mark. He was found out but somehow escaped the King's wrath. He was condemned to wander around trying to hide from his father's spies. Now he had had enough of wandering, and decided to stay in Raigarh.

He settled down in a cave some way up the hill, under the fort, and not far from the town. And there he meditated and prayed for days.

The people of Raigarh became curious about him, and many came up the hill to watch him pray. The Fakir sat on, undisturbed. Soon a whisper began that he was a very holy man, a hermit who prayed and

fasted day after day. So it was that curiosity turned to awe which bordered on worship. The people came and sat under the babul trees which shaded the entrance to the cave, and listened to the words of wisdom he sometimes deigned to utter, or just stared as his lips moved in prayer.

Naturally, word of the fakir's fame reached the King, who had only one daughter, a beautiful girl of fifteen who was betrothed to the Prince and heir of the neighbouring kingdom. He longed for a son so he made haste to pay the holy man a ceremonial visit. After welcoming the fakir to his kingdom, the King requested him to pray that the Rani might be blessed with a son, who would grow up and look after the kingdom.

The King went back to his palace, and after mulling over the matter for a few days, came up with what he thought was the right solution. The fakir was such a pious man that the gods would surely hear his prayers. If he could have all the fakir's prayers to himself, his greatest wish would be fulfilled, and he would soon have the son he desired. So he decided to build a temple for the fakir on the palace grounds.

The builders got busy, and soon a little temple was ready. Built of strong, cool stone, cut out of the hillside, surrounded by sacred pipul trees, it was a quiet oasis in the bustling world of the fort and the court.

When this choice retreat was ready to be lived in, the King begged the fakir to remove himself from the dusty and exposed cave, to come and live in the temple as an honoured guest of the King for as long as he wished.

Triumph flared in the fakir's breast, but with outward calm, he graciously accepted the King's offer. He only requested that he be allowed a few disciples to instruct in the holy scriptures. These young men, when not learning at their guru's feet, would see to his comfort and daily needs.

The court and the women's quarters began to buzz with gossip and speculation about this latest favourite of the King. Accounts of the fakir became more and more exaggerated. They also reached the fifteen-year-old Princess. Being romantic like many girls of her age, she figured that this wizard-saint might be able to conjure up for her a vision of the Prince she was

to marry. It would be nice to have just a peep into the future.

'But how am I to meet this saint?' she wondered, because like all royal princesses of her time she was well guarded and lived in seclusion.

One moonlit night, however, the Princess bribed her maid with a golden necklace, and crept out. Flitting in and out of the shadows, through the pipul trees she went, till she stood at the entrance of the shrine.

There sat the fakir, his lips moving silently in prayer. At the hint of a tinkle from her *payal*, his dark eyes flew open. He beheld the most beautiful girl he had ever seen. In an instant he sprang forward to fall at her dainty, white feet. All his pretence of holiness forgotten, he spoke chokingly of his love.

The Princess, shocked beyond words, hurriedly drew her veil across her face, and with the fleetness of a deer fled from the horrible fakir.

Utterly undone, the fakir realised that he had committed a blunder which might cost him his life. Swiftly he drew his hidden knife, and taking aim, threw it at the fleeing girl. Hissing like a snake, its

blade glinting, the knife struck her in the leg. Her speed unchecked, and hardly heeding the pain, the Princess plucked it out, and cast it from her. Racing up the stairs of the women's quarters, she at last reached the haven of her room.

All that night the fakir plotted the destruction of the Princess, for he had guessed that it was she. 'How dare she spurn me. I, who am a royal Rajput. I, who am counsellor to the King. I, whom the people worship. I will see that she does not marry the Prince. She weds me or not at all.'

But close on these thoughts came others. What if she revealed this escapade to the King? He would be disgraced, his hard-won comfort taken from him. He would be a hounded fugitive again. He could not allow this to happen.

As the sun's rays touched the ramparts of the fort, the fakir had devised a vengeful plan.

It was the King's custom to visit the fakir everyday. He would sit and confide some of his troubles to the fakir, and often seek his advice.

The King came to see him as usual, but all through the visit the fakir sat as if carved out of stone. Only

with each passing moment his eyes grew more flinty.

Naturally the King was alarmed. 'Is something the matter?' he asked. 'Has anything been done to offend you?'

As the fakir persisted in his silence, the King became quite frantic. And after much pleading he succeeded in making the holy man speak.

'What I must say will not be welcome to you,' he said in a menacing tone.

'Have I ever not listened to the gems of wisdom which fall from your lips? Every word you say is welcome to me,' said the King.

The fakir was again silent for a long time, and the King stood before him with folded hands. At last he broke his silence and the words were grim indeed.

'An evil was revealed to me during my meditation last night. An evil which is a threat to you, to your as yet unborn son, and to all who live in your domain. If it is not checked in time, this evil shall destroy you.'

The King gasped with fear. He could grapple with a human foe, but only the goodness of this holy man could fight this supernatural evil.

Folding his hands as if in prayer, the fakir continued

in a gloomy voice, "I was deep in my meditation, when this thing, this dreadful thing visited me."

"In wh...what shape did it come?" stammered the King.

"A light sound disturbed me, and I saw before me a beautiful girl. Even as I looked on that shining face, it suddenly changed into that of an Evil, beast-ugly and horrible. If it were not for the strength of my holiness it would have consumed me."

The fakir's keen, dark gaze perceived that the King was deeply shaken. He saw a frightened man in royal clothes.

"But how can we recognise this evil beast which appears as a beautiful girl?" implored the King.

"Search," said the fakir, "for a girl so lovely, that her beauty cannot be described. You will be able to recognise her by the wound on her leg. Pounce on her, tie her with ropes, and come to me. I will advise you what to do next."

The King hurried away to issue an order that every girl in the kingdom should have her legs examined. But no one was discovered to have a wound. Then came the turn of the Princess, who could no longer

conceal her injury.

Really upset with this turn of events, the King rushed to tell the fakir the bad news.

The fakir, of course, was ready with his story, "My poor son," he said, "how you have been deceived. This is no daughter of yours, she is just a substitute placed in your daughter's cradle. Your daughter was stolen soon after her birth. This girl is the Evil form in her shape. If you leave this fiend at large she will destroy you."

The King was so much under the influence of the fakir, that he did not pause even for a moment to consider that his poor daughter had never been anything but beautiful and good. She had never displayed a single evil trait. The King declared himself ready to follow any course of action the fakir advised.

"First and foremost, this fiend must be secured. Send me two carpenters!" ordered the fakir firmly.

He commanded the carpenters to build a large chest through which neither air nor water could penetrate. The royal carpenters were skilled, and after banging away for a day and night, a chest stood in the doorway of the temple.

The fakir directed the King to bring the poor Princess to the temple and between them they thrust her into the chest and sealed it with long iron nails. That night they stole round the back of the fort, and sent the chest floating down the stream. The fakir was satisfied.

All that night the chest bobbed down the stream, sometimes carried by the current, and sometimes halted by water-smoothened boulders.

The sun had just risen, and as the morning mist parted, the sound of drums filled the forest. The sound seemed to be drawing steadily closer to the stream. A royal hunt was in progress.

A young Prince was hunting wild boar in the company of courtiers and huntsmen, supported by beaters from the nearest village. Spear in hand, he spurred his horse onwards as he spotted his quarry. Trees rushed past as he galloped towards the stream. Overtaking the wild boar as it wheeled to avoid the water, the Prince drove his spear in with a triumphant cry.

As all his company converged on the dead boar, the Prince cast his glance towards the stream. He

noted with interest a large chest lodged against a rock. He sent a few of his stalwarts into the water to retrieve the chest. Safely back on the bank, they levered open the top of the box.

Filled with curiosity, the Prince was the first to look inside the chest—and there lay the most beautiful girl he had ever seen. Her dark lashes outlined against her smooth skin, she was obviously unconscious.

Tenderly, he lifted her out. The courtiers rushed forward to spread out their colourful turbans on the sand, and the Prince laid her down. From his saddle bag he took the leather *chhagal* (water bottle) and gently sprinkled some water on her face, where they sparkled like early morning dew on rose petals.

The Princess came sighing back to life. Focussing her doe-like gaze, she looked into the anxious eyes of the Prince. She blushed, sat up hurriedly and drew her gauze veil across her face.

After she had revived sufficiently, she told her terrible story.

“Oh, you are the royal Princess I am to wed!” exclaimed the Prince, rather pleased that he was to marry this girl who delighted him so. “Let us be

married straight away. Your father does not deserve to have you back.”

So they were married in a little temple on the edge of the forest. The royal courtiers and villagers, in high good humour, arranged an impromptu celebration, while a runner sprinted to the capital with a letter to the King from the Prince.

The next day, when the sun was high in the sky, he brought her to his palace. The King and Queen received the newly-wed couple at the palace gates. The Queen enfolded the Princess in her arms. The Kingdom had never seen such fireworks and celebrations as went on for the next few days.

When the excitement had died down, the Prince fell to thinking how he might avenge the wrong done to his dear and lovely wife. The evil fakir needed to be taught a lesson. Rumour had it that the King was still under his influence, and the fakir was getting steadily more powerful. Finally, the solution dawned on the Prince.

He got the broken chest back from the waterside, and had it repaired. His huntsmen trapped a ferocious monkey from the forest, and put it inside the chest.

As had been done before, they hammered down the top with long iron nails.

This the Prince sent back to the fakir. One day when the fakir came out of the temple to get a breath of fresh air, what should he see, but the chest back under the pipul trees!

As the Prince had expected, so great was the fakir's anxiety that he did not stop to consider how the chest came to be there. He was seized with a horrible curiosity to look inside and make sure that the Princess was dead.

He dragged the chest into the temple and closed the door. With his deadly knife he prised open the top. Horror paralysed him as the huge monkey struggled out, snapping and snarling. There was a brief struggle and the fakir lay dead.

When the fakir's disciples arrived to sit at their guru's feet, they started back in terror and fled. Very soon the story spread and came to the ears of the Princess and her husband.

Knowing that she no longer had anything to fear, the Princess made peace with her misguided father.

Jhuman, the Idler

The Bhats are the bards of Rajasthan. In olden times they were patronised by the Kings of Rajputana, and were the official genealogists of royal families. They were also skilful story-tellers who regaled both courtiers and common people with folktales replete with humour and wisdom. One old and wise Bhat related a tale calculated to inspire the laziest person to some kind of activity, howsoever ridiculous.

Once there was a lazy young man called Jhuman. All day long he did nothing but eat and sleep. He was the youngest of three brothers, so while the older two worked in the fields, he dawdled at home. When his father died, the brothers looked after him.

Time went by. Jhuman continued obstinately in his inactivity. Not a twinge of conscience troubled him; he did not even feel bored. He passed his days in great comfort.

Even marriage to a spirited girl did not disturb the tenor of his indolent life. He ate the bread of idleness and lolled in the lap of luxury, for his father-in-law was rich and indulgent. However, the winds of change had to blow some time...

One fine day, the inevitable happened. Jhuman could no longer afford to be lazy and slothful. His wife was pretty unhappy about his persisting inertia. "What have you ever done," she asked angrily, "that can be called worthwhile? You are lazy and aimless, and you have eaten away all our wealth. Everybody has some aim in life, something they wish to accomplish. Only you sit around doing absolutely nothing. You can be sure that I am not going to sell my jewellery to keep you alive."

For the first time in his easy-going life, Jhuman was faced with a disturbing problem. Though his intellect

was rusty through lack of use, and concentrated thinking gave him a headache, he actually made a decision to do something.

Jhuman was well aware of his limitations. He doubted whether he had the strength to conceive a goal, and then to work patiently towards it. The very thought brought the perspiration out on his forehead. So he hit upon an easy but definite aim, something that would trouble him the least. He thought he had the perfect solution.

“As you want me to have an aim in life,” he said to his wife, “I have decided that I will not eat any food during the day till I see the face of the potter who lives next door.”

“Well,” said Jhuman’s wife, with a shrug of resignation, “something is better than nothing.”

Accordingly, Jhuman’s days took on a routine which tallied with the appearances of the potter. However, one morning, though Jhuman was up in time, he did not see the potter. Apparently the man had left his house quite early to fetch clay from the riverside.

The day passed slowly for Jhuman, but the potter

did not return. Hunger growled in Jhuman’s stomach. It was late evening and the sun’s last rays were lighting the heavens when Jhuman finally bestirred himself to go and look for the potter at the riverside, to see his face and have a bite.

Meanwhile, the potter was digging clay with his donkey standing around. Suddenly his shovel hit something solid. He dug deeper, and lo and behold, through a hole gold *mohars* came pouring out! He had accidentally unearthed a treasure trove! The potter felt faint with disbelief but his excitement was not to last long. For at that very moment Jhuman came, ambling along, and spotted the potter. Made unobservant by a lifetime of mental laziness, he did not notice the excitement and fear on the potter’s face. He turned right back, all his thoughts concentrated on the meal he would soon be eating.

The potter, on the other hand, stood transfixed with fear and guilt. “Now he will go to Raja Sahib, and report that I have discovered this treasure. And I will have to part with all this wealth.” His mind raced.

The potter was galvanised into action. Desperately,

he shouted after Jhuman's receding figure, pleading with him to stop.

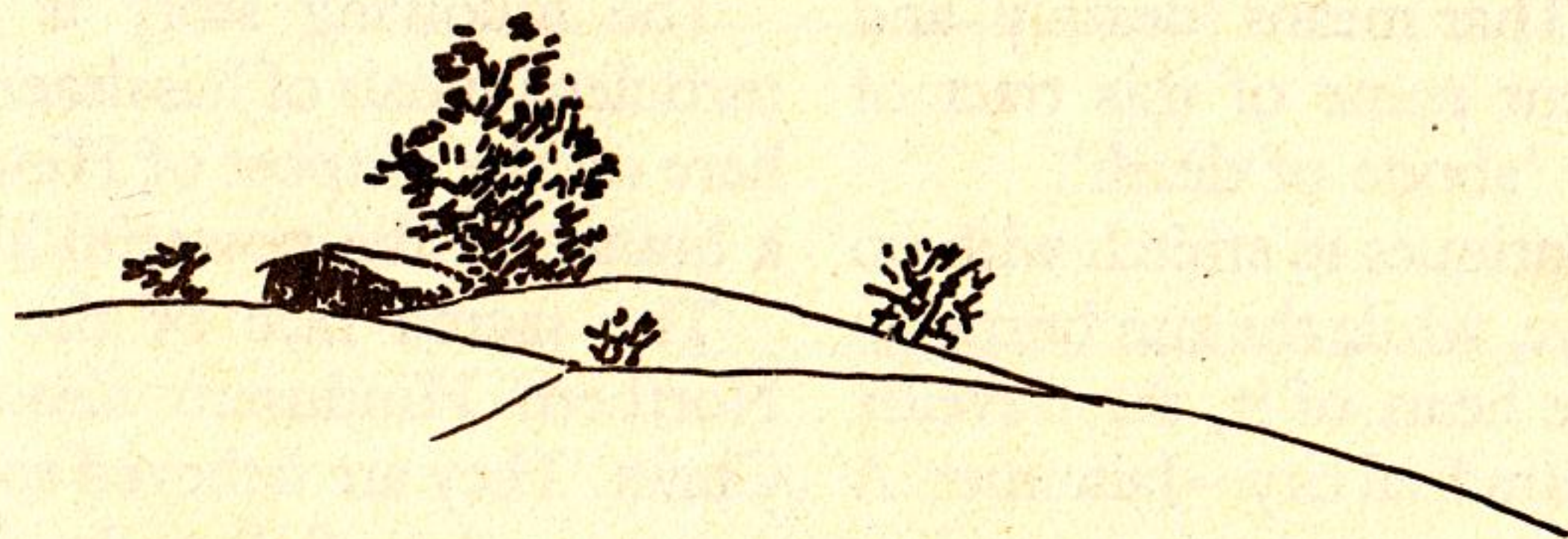
"But why," replied Jhuman, turning around reluctantly, "there is no need for me to wait. I've seen your face, and now I can eat my first meal of the day."

The potter persisted in calling him back, so Jhuman retraced his footsteps. Already faint with hunger, he nearly fell when he saw the heap of gold coins. The

potter was excessively polite and generous, and insisted on filling a saddle bag with the gold. He presented it to Jhuman.

"Half is yours, and half is mine," he said.

Thus was Jhuman rewarded for having an aim in life. Thereafter he occupied himself with doing nothing while his wife counted out the money, and they lived comfortably and at peace with one another.



Jaisalmer, the Desert City

The Thar Desert in western Rajasthan is 500 miles long and 200 miles wide. Thar means 'deathly' and is evolved from the ancient name of this tract of country — 'Marusthali' or 'abode of death'.

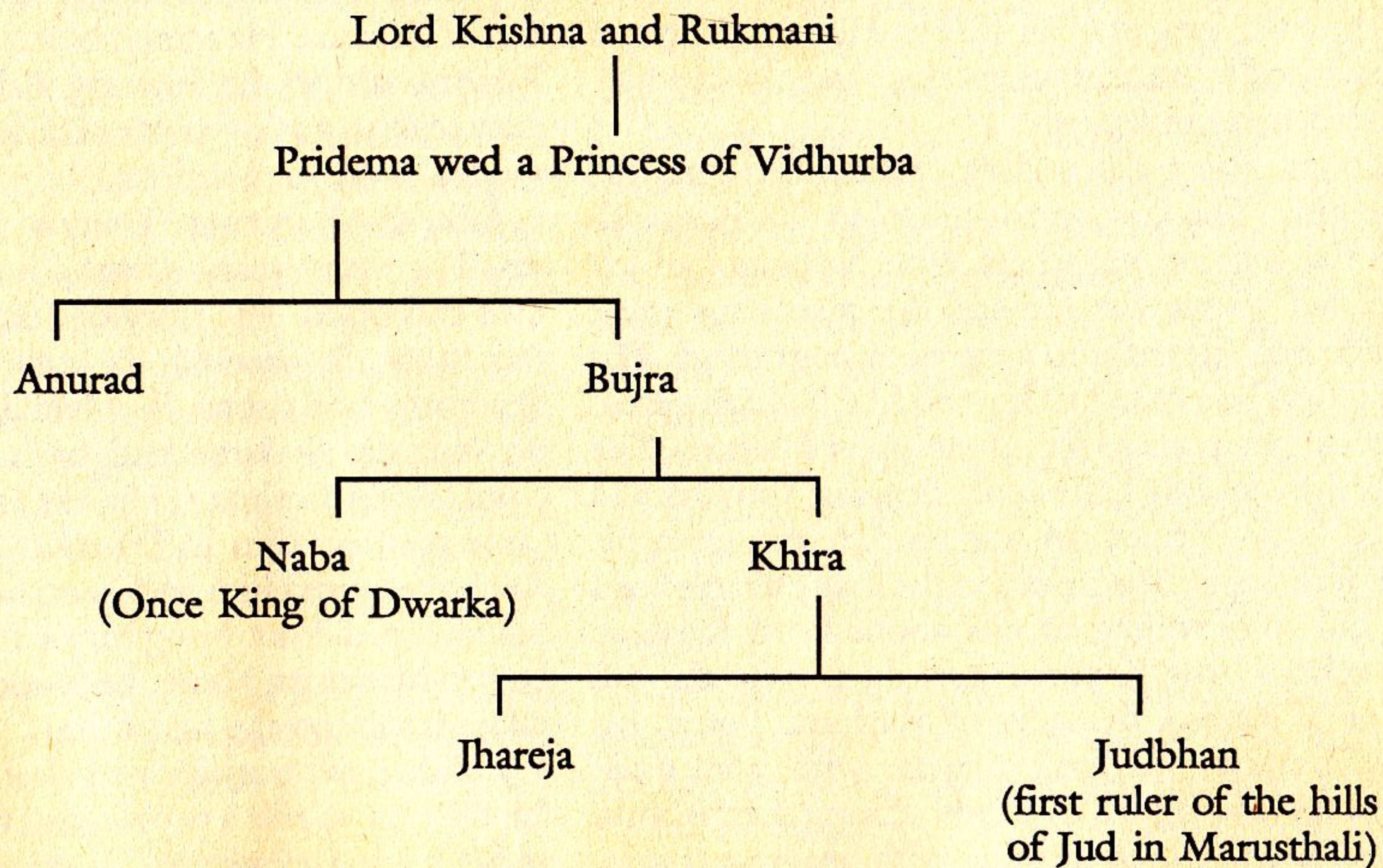
This boundless waste continues to stretch with no green trees to relieve the eye, while the sun burns on the drab sands. Yet, at the heart of it, the traveller stumbles upon an almost paradisal city—Jaisalmer. A fort, glowing golden in the sunset, crowns the ancient hills of Jud. Reflecting the fiery sun are the many *sirr* or temporary lakes and salt marshes. Indeed, the term *mer*, in the tradition of Rajwarra means a rocky oasis

in the sandy desert.

The following story is but a fragment of the turbulent annals of Jaisalmer. The tribe which settled here on the outpost of Hindustan were the Bhattis, a branch of the powerful Yadu race.

The sacred race of the Yadus held sway over Northern Hindustan almost 25 centuries before Christ. They are believed to be descended from that most popular of all gods—Lord Krishna. Jaisalmer or the Marusthali of ancient geography, therefore, has the honour of being founded by a descendent of Lord Krishna himself.

The family tree according to the Bhatti genealogists is like this:



Footsore, but spiritually uplifted, Judbhan at last lay down his majestic head to sleep. Even in repose, he looked a son of kings. He walked tall and straight, with the compact gait of an athlete. His high forehead was balanced by an aristocratic nose and a chin which indicated determination.

Judbhan was a descendant of Hari Krishna, the divine king. The king so romantic, so chivalrous, so much the warrior, yet so graceful. Judbhan had felt compelled to see for himself the places his great ancestor had turned into centres of pilgrimage. His royal blood had called to him and he had answered.

He had first gone to Vrindavan, near Mathura. The sylvan surroundings, the lazily flowing Yamuna had pleased him—Vrindavan was so different from his native Rajputana. The priests in the many temples had been only too willing to talk about Lord Krishna. They related how Krishna grew up despite the evil designs of Kamsa, the ruler of Mathura. For all his divine powers, Krishna played with the *gopis*, sometimes tending the cows and sharing their labour. He won the hearts of the *gopis* with his great charm, and the melodious music of his flute. Judbhan was

delighted.

He then turned his steps towards the historic battlefield of Kurukshetra. There he relived the cosmic acts of Krishna. He remembered especially the words Krishna said to the faltering Arjun: "Perform your duty selflessly as a warrior and fight without desiring the fruits of your actions."

After that he went to Dwarka, the holy spot by the sea. For many years Krishna had ruled righteously over this place. The story of Sudama impressed him the most. It seemed to embody the grace and generosity of Krishna. Judbhan delighted in the story of Sudama. Sudama had been an old friend and classmate of Krishna's. He was a poor Brahmin, who came to meet him in Dwarka, to ask for his help. Krishna received him with great honour and affection. Sudama could not bring himself to ask for anything, but on his return home, he found a palace where his dilapidated cottage had been!

Judbhan felt transformed after his pilgrimage. He felt the urge to rule a people, and to rule as righteously as his great ancestor had done. But the family had broken up after Krishna's death—there were no lands

or kingdoms anymore. Yet, Juddhan vowed in his heart that he would always live a life worthy of Krishna.

One day, as Juddhan lay sleeping, shadowed by the rocky hills of Marusthali, there came to him a vivid dream. A most beautiful lady was attempting to awaken him. Her face shone, her head was crowned with the richest jewels, her dress glowed with light.

“Juddhan! Juddhan! Awake, my son.”

So real was the voice, so unexpected and unearthly, that Juddhan awoke. He sat up blinking, to see that the vision was real. A goddess stood before him!

Trembling, he went down on his knees before her, and touching the ground said, “Most worshipful goddess, I am honoured. May I do something for you?”

“I have heard your vows, young Juddhan. I trust that you will always stand by them. Ask for anything that you desire most, and it will be granted to you.”

Juddhan did not hesitate.

“Give me land that I may inhabit. Give me a people that I can rule.”

“Rule in these hills,” replied the goddess, and

disappeared.

Night came and went, but Juddhan lay awake pondering over this extraordinary vision. Dawn was breaking rosily, when sleep came to his eyes again.

Noises woke up Juddhan. There was great commotion in the town which lay sprawled beneath the hills. Sounds carried clearly over the silent desert air. There was loud lamentation and weeping. Drums were being beaten, a hundred voices were speaking at once. Juddhan decided to investigate.

He mingled with the people of the town of Beheraa. He found the cause of the mourning. The Prince of the country had died without leaving an heir. There was confusion, and a great risk of civil war. The crowds were disputing who would ascend the throne.

All unknown to him, discussions were being conducted in the royal palace; and they concerned him. Amidst the wrangling courtiers, the Prime Minister motioned for silence. He said: “Last night while I was asleep, there came to me a vivid dream. A descendent of Hari Krishna has come into Behera. I propose that we seek him out and make him our Prince.”

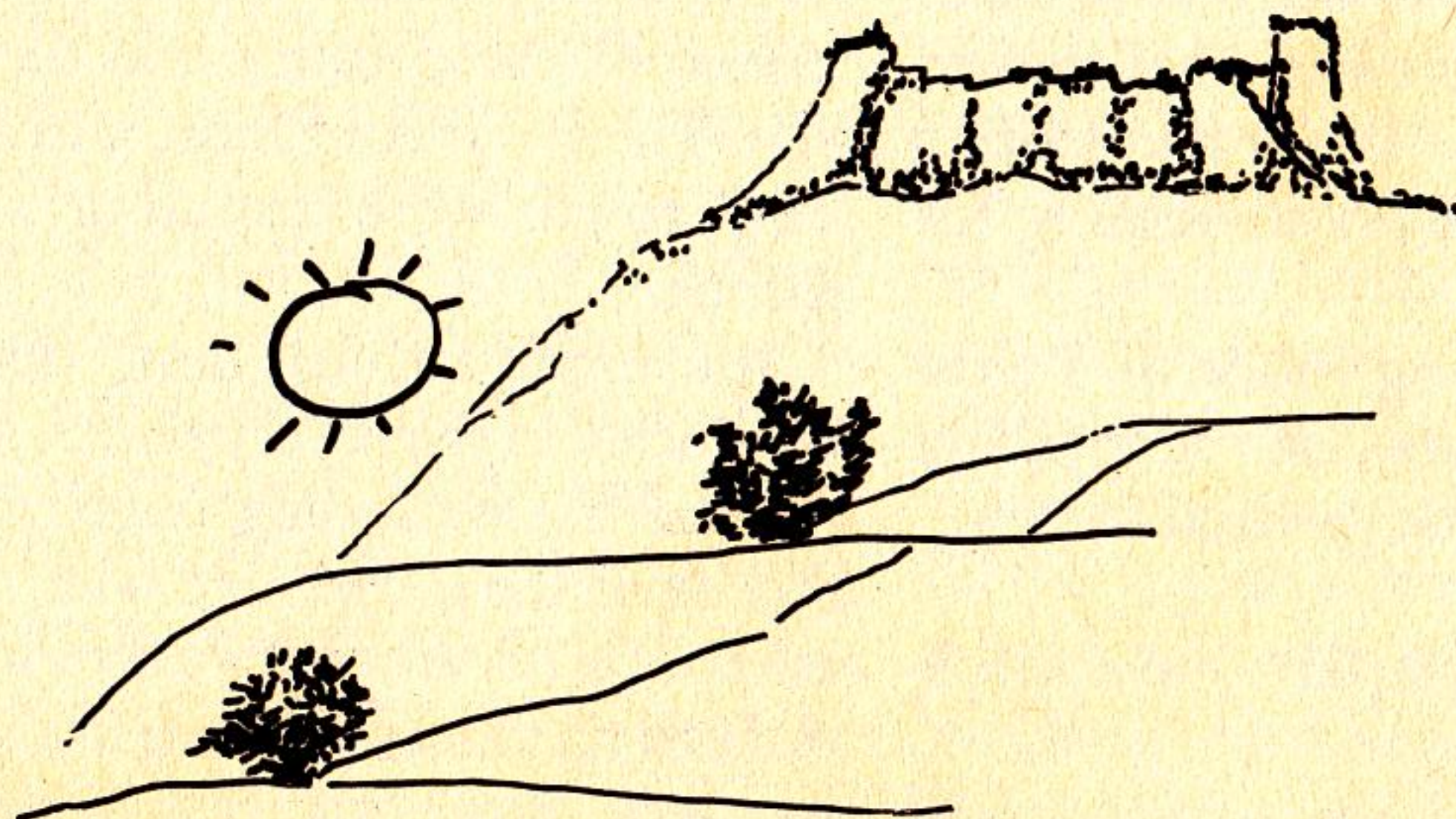
The name of Lord Krishna silenced all; the courtiers shared the devotion of thousands. No one opposed the Prime Minister's proposal. They agreed unanimously that they must find the descendant of Krishna and make him their Prince.

As Juddhan was the only stranger who had come to Behera that day, he was found easily. His kingly bearing and deep knowledge of Hari Krishna, as well as his narration of the night's vision, convinced all.

He was elected Prince.

For several days the people and courtiers of Behera celebrated Juddhan's coronation. He became a great and righteous king, much beloved of his people. He married and had many children.

Henceforth the hills around Behera were called *Judoo-ka-dang*—'the mountains of Jud'. This was the ancient name of Jaisalmer.



The Langas' Song

The poor peasants of Rajasthan not only battle with the encroaching desert, but also live a life extraordinarily rich in a culture peculiar to them. The Langas, for instance, are a group of professional folk musicians. Some Langas live in Barnawa, a village of thatched huts among the sand dunes. They are trained in the oral tradition, their memories replete with thousands of traditional couplets.

The young Langa studies under his guru and memorises all the traditional songs before he can acquire the art of improvisation, which is the backbone of folklore. Langas sing their tales, accompanied by the *kamayacha*, which is a string instrument, drums, and the twenty-seven-string sarangi, which is a bow instrument.

As the village folk sit around the Langas during the cold desert nights, the finale is always the story of

Nagji and Nagwanti. It is a passionate ballad, with the universally appealing theme of tragic love. So evocative is this song that the Langas declare: "There is nothing after Nagji."

Nagji loved Nagwanti; it seemed to him that he had known and loved her forever. And Nagwanti, too, could never remember when she had not loved Nagji.

They had grown up together, playing in the fields, splashing by the well, running endlessly hither and thither. Before the monsoons they would forage for the sour *ber* sporting scratches from the thorny bushes. In winter no mulberry tree was safe from their agile, climbing feet and active mouths. But most of all they loved to swing from the red-blossomed tree which grew at the very edge of their village.

And so they grew—he into a handsome youth with broad shoulders and flashing dark eyes, and she into

a beauty with lustrous hair and the most delightful features. Everyone in the village was accustomed to seeing them together. Their parents never even thought of protesting, though traditionally young boys and girls did not mix freely or become friends.

For Nagji and Nagwanti, never a day would pass when they did not meet, sometimes beneath the flame of the forest, and sometimes in the fields, before Nagji returned home with the plough over his shoulders.

Then one day, Nagji and Nagwanti came alive to their love. While swinging her from the flaming tree, Nagji suddenly realised that Nagwanti had grown into a lovely woman. His heart skipped a beat as he saw his beautiful childhood friend framed against the March blossoms.

Nagwanti knew his every mood, and she noticed the sudden shyness in his eyes. Then it came to her in a great wave that she loved Nagji too. From that day their friendship became deeper and more special. Everything took on a new meaning, an intensity. They knew that life would be insupportable without each other. So the halcyon days passed by happily.

Then storm clouds began to gather over their newly

blossomed love. Nagwanti's father began to negotiate her marriage. Like all Rajput girls, she also must be married soon. In so many households daughters were married off in their childhood and Nagwanti was a young woman now.

She was betrothed to a farmer from a neighbouring village, a man she had not even met. Her heart protested against this marriage. She belonged to Nagji, and no one else could ever win her love.

Nagji and Nagwanti still met, but secretly. They could not afford to be seen together anymore. Nagwanti's honour must be guarded. Both were in the grip of despair. Nagwanti's eyes were always awash with tears. The laughter of young love had been silenced forever.

She said, "Nagji, it is you I have always loved. It is impossible that I should belong to another. I would rather die. Let us run away together and make a new life."

"It would break your father's heart if we dishonoured your family. You will be dishonoured also. But I cannot bear to think that you should be the wife of another."

"I will meet you here, Nagji, underneath this tree where we have shared so much. I promise that I will marry only you. I promise that I will meet you here as the sun rises on my wedding day."

So saying, she turned and ran, trying to stifle the sobs rising within her.

Her wedding day approached. There was great excitement and merriment at home. She was pampered and fussed over. But with each passing moment her heart grew heavier. She thought only of Nagji.

On the wedding day, Nagji was waiting under the blossoming flame of the forest. He was there before the east lightened up. All the world seemed to be silent, expectant. But she did not come. He waited till the sun had climbed over the horizon, but still she did not come.

At last, with sorrow drowning his entire being, he knew that she would never come. He knew that he could not see another man marry his beloved. He

knew that he could not live without her.

He climbed up into that tree. The tree that was laden with blood-red flowers. The tree from which he had so often swung her. He unsheathed the dagger from his belt, and whispering her name, stabbed himself through his heart.

But Nagwanti had only been delayed. First one, then another, had held her back in jest and affection. At last, she ran nimbly to meet her lover, the man she would marry.

Nagwanti waited in vain. And when her eyes grew weary of looking into the distance, she climbed into the flame of the forest only to find the limp body of her dear Nagji. With unbounded joy she eased the dagger from his heart and plunged it into her own.

So were Nagji and Nagwanti united in an eternal bond of love. Every March when the flame of the forest blossoms it seems to glow with their mingled blood.



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